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ABSTRACT

The social construct of gender is laced throughout society and carries stereotypes through the use of language, arts, literature, and social practices. As more women begin using computers more frequently and in new ways, stereotypes become evident in the patterns of communication in cyberspace. One of the characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is its lack of easy social contextualization. Despite the anonymity of the communication media, some women report that they are harassed and intimidated from posting and particulating in on-line conferences or via e-mail. To avoid this, some women choose gender-neutral user identifications and prefer to post in women-only conferences or mailing lists. The social implications of computer-mediated communication are vast, from its potential ability to overthrow centralized control of information to its potential ability to help people to communicate with each other with fewer prejudices and misunderstandings. Although there are increasing numbers of women who are actively using cyberspace, it remains male-dominated, and most training materials for the computer environment are written by males. An extensive review of online World Wide Web page design documents revealed that the topic of gender representation in language and general page designs was not addressed. In order to reach a balance of language and imagery in cyberspace, a neutral area is needed where stereotypes come to rest. (AEF)

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Language, Gender and Cyberspace: Pulling the Old Stereotypes into New Territory

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Abstract

The social construct of gender is laced throughout society and carries stereotypes through the use of language, arts, literature, and social practices. Males and females do have things in common, but there are also male and female spaces that create divisions that are hard to cross. As more women begin using computers more frequently and in new ways, we see the stereotypes becoming evident in the patterns of communication in the cyberspace environment.

Cultural Concepts and Communication

Gender is a social construct and as such, it both influences and is a product of communication. Messages delivered to people over many years, through different social situations and various media, become part of the daily vocabulary that can perpetuate gender stereotypes. From a very early age, males and females are taught different linguistic practices. Communicative behaviors that are acceptable for boys, for example, may be considered completely inappropriate for girls.

Research on women and language reveals that women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language usage treats them. So, for example, women reflect their role in the social order by adopting linguistic practices commonly associated with feminine mannerisms, such as using tag questions, qualifiers, and fillers to soften their messages, often making mild-sounding requests and apologizing for asking for things that are actual needs. Likewise, language directed at women were traditionally identified by their association with men, and occupational titles indicated which jobs were "for men" and which were "for women."

While much of this has changed today, our society retains a tendency to imply that maleness, after all, is the standard for normalcy, a female physician may still be referred to as a "woman doctor," and while a female committee chair may be called the "chair" or the "chairperson," a male in that role will more likely be called "chairman". What is learned about gender, is reflected in language usage and graphical representations. Communicative practices not only reflect notions about gender, but they also create cultural concepts of gender.

Cultural concepts of gender become ingrained within society to the point where they become accepted as "the way things are" or "the way things have always been." Sometimes these concepts are so pervasive that they are barely noticeable because they are expected. Thus, we expect an investment counselor to speak in a certain way to women clients and in another way to male clients, based upon the language and level of knowledge perceived as important at the first meeting. This seems to be the case for computer consultants as well. Thus when a woman asks for consulting, she will be given different information than a male who asks the same question. Often, the consultants will "talk down" to women or give them less information or fail to the put the provided information into a meaningful context.

The patterns of gender influence on communication carry into all areas of life, touching the home, the school, the community, the workplace, and so on. As more people become involved with computer-based communication, the patterns are evident there are well.

Computer Culture and Cyberspace

The existing male technology community was shaped by our society. Members of that community share characteristics in common which each other, and do not always know how to relate to others who are different from them. So, although they may not consciously try exclude women, they do not try include them either, thus the

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gender gap in the computer culture and cyberspace widens as those in the mainstream gain more information while those not in the mainstream are omitted from the information pipeline.

Cyberspace is not a gender neutral space. One of the characteristics of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) is its lack of easy social contextualization. CMC neutralizes such social status clues as appearance, voice, organizational hierarchy, and often gender, dependent, of course, upon the user ID, mailing address, and message content (Turkle, 1995). Despite the relative anonymity of the communication media, some women report that they are harassed and intimidated from posting and participating in on-line conferences or via e-mail. To avoid this some women choose gender-neutral user identifications (IDs), and prefer to post in women-only conferences or mailing lists (Turkle, 1995).

Gladys We, of Simon Fraser University, investigated reactions of men and women to determine how they felt about on-line versus face-to-face communication (1993). She distributed a questionnaire to various UseNet newsgroups and an eclectic range of mailing lists in order to determine the answer to that question. She concludes that on the surface, it appears that most people believe that cyberspace tends to be friendly to women, allowing them to adopt more active personae, and to speak on a playing field that is more level due to reduced gender cues (We, 1993). Yet, we need to look beyond that surface level assumption. After all, most people assume that women have an equal chance at becoming a scientist, a professor, a doctor, a lawyer, or the chief executive officer (CEO) of a large company. Yet all of these occupations are under represented by women and the subtle discriminations become obvious in the patterns of the information flow within the job.

Messages and Myths

Message sources privileged by society as legitimate knowledge generators create a web of socially compelling discourses. Thus, religious, mythic, philosophic, and scientific discourses teach us, among other things, about society's values and rules related to gender. It is no accident, then, that American myths focus on the active male and the supporting female, or that Plato defined women as "lesser men," or that Aristotle described women as "a deformity, a misbegotten male," (Miles, 1989) or that craniologists of the nineteenth century argued that women's smaller heads justified their subordinate position in society thus initiating all the "pretty little head" rhetoric about women (Tavris &1984), or that Freud believed women had "little sense of justice" (Osborne, 1979).

The rhetorical force of myths in constructing powerful world views is awesome. There are no myths that are completely innocent or free of ideology, just as there are no "natural" myths. Every myth is a manufactured object, and it is the inherent bad faith of a myth to seem or to pretend to be a fact. Similarly, artistic representation has been especially potent. Since antiquity, women have been among the most popular subjects for painters and sculptors, most of whom have been male. Multiple roles have been assigned by male artists to women in art, both positive and negative. Women are depicted as objects of beauty, as symbols of passivity, as images of the powerless, and sometimes as images of power. All these privileged discourses create a web of meaning, a socially constructed world view that historically has excluded or made secondary the experience of certain groups of people.

In addition, mass mediated messages offer the most contemporary, powerful, and technologically sophisticated strategies for shaping cultural reality. The beauty, diet, and advertising industries are the most obvious, best researched examples of contemporary, self-conscious myth-makers who control cultural concepts and acceptable images of gender of what it takes and means to be male or female, masculine or feminine (Wolf, 1991).

Mass Media and Cyberspace

The myriad of mass mediated communication forms available now range from the simplistic printing press to the information superhighway and beyond. The role of culture in communication practices directs us to an intercultural perspective on gender and communication. The social implications of computer mediated communication are vast, from its potential ability to overthrow centralized control of information to its potential ability to help people, no matter what their gender, race, or physical appearance communicate with each other with fewer prejudices and misunderstandings than any other medium in existence. In many ways, the on-line world, named "cyberspace" by William Gibson, has its own culture, morals, and expectations, but in many ways, it replicates the biases, contradictions, and prejudices of our society.

Although the are increasing numbers of women who are actively using the cyberspace environment, it remains male dominated, and most training materials for the computer environment are written by males. As educators direct more students to on-line activities, develop more materials for World Wide Web (WWW) servers, and schools become involved with accessing and creating WWW pages, one would expect to find some guidance about issues of diversity on the WWW. Yet an extensive review of on-line WWW page design documents revealed that the

topic of gender representation in language and general page designs was not addressed by at all. One book does consider the importance of gender in graphic representations for the WWW, but it tends to sanitize the graphics rather than appreciate diversity (Horton, Taylor, Ignatcio, & Hoft, 1996). Horton, et al. recommend the following strategies for producing graphics for WWW pages that do not perpetuate sexual stereotypes and biased gender roles.

1. Use simple , abstract figures, devoid of recognizable bone structure or hair style.
2. Use unshaded line drawings of people.
3. Use simple unisex cartoons or stick-figures drawings of people, hands, and faces.
4. Simplify drawings of clothing to omit seams, folds, buttons, and belts.
5. Do not show bare arms, shoulders, legs, or feet..

While this might be one way of avoiding gender stereotypes, it produces sanitized images and strips the medium of its potential graphic power. Reaching a balance of language and imagery in cyberspace will certainly need to find a neutral area in which the stereotypes come to rest while not sanitizing our culture to make us all the same. What good does it do to put a stick figure within a document that is loaded with biased language? Perhaps we need to look at some of the more subtle gender messages that are often overlooked in cyberspace and the computer culture in general.

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